

CHAPTER XV.
Money.

GARRY entered upon his new duties the following morning in a spirit anything but reassuring to his companion. Up to that time he had made his own industry the butt of much good natured ridicule, viewing it apparently as a sort of vacation novelty amusing enough while the novelty lasted. But he went from task to task that next day in a methodical, dogged fashion that was farthest of all from amiability. Two or three times Steve, trying to spare him needless effort, attempting to show him how to favor blistered hands and aching back, met with rebuffs so curt that he learned to keep his advice to himself. He knew what end Garry was working to achieve. He would have allowed himself to smile over the thought that the other man would be tired enough before night came without trying to make that work any harder, only he did not dare venture that smile.



"Miriam Burrell!" he breathed.

happens one who keeps on trying only because there is one other person at least who may be the gladder for his success. I don't expect you to understand. I know it will sound small and cowardly to you. It's too lonesome living, Steve, when there's no one who cares whether you live or not!"

"That does not fit your case," Steve objected instantly, "when your danger or your safety keeps a woman watching white faced with terror through the night for your return."

Garry propped himself upon one elbow, the better to see the speaker's countenance.

"My safety?" he repeated blankly. "My return?" And then, vainly grateful, "You are not the sort of man who lies convincingly, Steve."

And then Stephen O'Mara let him have it—all the story which had lain so many days in his heart. There were times when Garry went even paler during the short recital, times when everything else was submerged by the incredulity that flooded his face. But before Steve had finished the last trace of doubt was gone. Before the end came Garry had bowed his head, this time in flushed, self-conscious wonder which transfigured him.

"Miriam Burrell!" he breathed. "Proud, intolerant!"

His head came up. The next instant he voiced the words which Steve most wanted to hear.

"You shouldn't have told me this," said he. "You had no right, unless"—Steve laughed at him.

"God bless you, boy," he exclaimed. "I asked her if I might. Why, don't you understand that she meant to herself if I didn't? You see, she is—far, far braver than you are, Garry."

Garry lifted his hands and hid his face.

So quietly that his exit made no sound Steve slipped to his feet and passed outside. It had stopped raining. The hardwood ridges, touched by frost, were flaming streaks of color against the rainwashed evergreens when he picked his way down to the river and found a dry stone for a seat. An hour and more he sat there while his thoughts went back over the trail of the years, the trail which had led him from that cabin to a pair of violet eyes and lips that arched like a boy's.

Steve let his mind turn again unservedly to his own problem that morning. He tried to face sure eyed the road which still stretched ahead. He did not know that Garrett Devereau, the debonaire, the cynical, the world weary and world wise, had broken down and was sobbing noiselessly, as men sob, in the room which he had left, shaking with deep and terrible gasps that racked his very soul. But

it was already daybreak; it was trait's end now for Garry. It does make a difference if one knows that some one cares.

Upon their return to Thirty Mile two nights later Joe's attitude of criticism was the first thing which piqued Steve's interest. There was something ludicrous in the former's voice as he sat and anatomized the food which the cook boy brought to the table, even though he devoured hungrily all that his plate would hold. And because Joe was so obviously primed for a sensation that evening out of sheer perversity Steve struggled to draw him into a discussion of a topic which, just as obviously, had no appeal just then.

"What I hope to do," he confided gravely to Garry, "is to finish up at Morrison and make possible the transfer of some of those men up here. We are working only one shift now. With

what I might have thought twenty-four hours back. But doesn't one fact remain unchanged still, no matter what we think? Suppose we admit that some one else does want this stretch of track we're laying. Suppose somebody is figuring on picking it up cheap at a bankruptcy price if we forfeit to the Reserve company. You know yourself that you would never have begun it simply for the profit there will be in moving the Reserve logs and the millions on millions of feet of lumber, both to the east and west, which can't be touched at anything but a prohibitive figure without this road. We were going through to the border too. And if some one else is betting that we don't, if some one else is betting that we can't yank a trainload of logs down to this end of the line before the 1st of May, that doesn't alter our case any, does it? Even though we suspect that some man is playing us to lose, do we have to know exactly who he is?"

Slowly, but very surely, the older man's face began to smooth.

"Once or twice," he stated, "I've thought to anticipate you, perhaps because I have it on you a little, as they say, in the matter of years. I'm not going to attempt it any more, for I thought that this conversation would be at least a surprise to you. You sit there and take it very quietly for a man who has been badly startled."

"Fat Joe has been preaching it for a month," oddly enough, Stephen O'Mara chose that point at which to laugh softly. "And I, for a month, have been ridiculing him. That's one of Fat Joe's pet diversions, you know. When all other excitement fails Joe invariably falls back upon an imagination too totally vivid to be wasted on technical things. I laughed at him until last night. Do you—but, of course, you know Garry Devereau?" he finished.

"Knew his father," Elliott answered succinctly. "Know him well. Good blood, good brains, big heart! Why?"

And then for the second time that day Steve related the salient points of that episode which had ended with the first gray streaks of returning day. During the recital the expressions which chased across Elliott's face were as varied as they were full of concern.

"Then I wasn't merely hysterical, was I?" he brooded after Steve had finished. "Who—who did you say you thought might be behind the man who would have had your plans had it not been for Mr. Devereau?"

"I didn't say," replied Steve, and for the first time since his entrance there was mirth in the union of their laughter.

"It all brings us back to the point from which we started," the younger man went on when they were grave again. "It's a plain enough issue so far as we are concerned. We've got to be at the mouth of that lower valley by May. We're going to be! And as I see it, wasting time and energy in—shall we call it sleuthing, Mr. Elliott?—won't help us much. We thought that lack of time and the general nature of this country were going to be handicap enough. But now your money is in and I—I never did like to be beaten. Can't we let it stand like that, at least until some one else makes a plainer move? We know the cards we hold. If others care to sit in perhaps we'll all come to a showdown next spring at Thirty Mile. It'll be easy enough to explain just how we did it. Allis based on veiled opposition would not interest the Reserve people much if we left their timber there to rot. * * * And I'm trying not to over-look any bets, Mr. Elliott."

Hastily the iron gray man thrust his hat back from his forehead. He came to his feet and crossed and clasped one hand upon Steve's shoulder.

"Next May," he barked. "O'Mara, I'm glad you came down this morning. I've been carrying a lot of those ideas around in my head until they had become nightmarish. But I'm through now. You won't hear me croak again. I staked what I had on you months ago. I'd do it again this minute. What's the odds, after all, who it is that's playing us to lose? It's only

the fact that somebody may be fighting us that needs to occupy our attention. I'm done worrying. Do you hear? But what about those men who are quitting us? You are sure it would be unwise to import labor? It's cheaper, you know."

Steve, too, had risen.

"We'd have the prettiest kind of a scrap on our hands the first day we tried to use them," he explained. "It would be dead enough before we got through. I guess I'd better run right out and have a talk with McLean. He knows these men even better than I do, and I'm almost one of them, you know. And I'll get a line on some of these delinquents who are crying calamity for the countryside. I'd better, because we'll need them. They simply haven't become thoroughly interested yet; that's all. It will take something to jolt them, something to set them on fire. And then—then just watch my plaid shirted boys go! They'll eat up your sledge swingers!"

Something of that promised fire was reflected now in Hardwick Elliott's eyes.

"By Gad," he exclaimed; "by Gad, if it wasn't for Annesley, I'd say the thing was worth it. Win or lose, just for the game itself! You go ahead and see McLean. I'll be over there later myself. I promised Allison that I'd show the works to some of the young folks up there on the hill. His daughter—but I keep forgetting that you've known her longer than I have. There's quite a party of them. She announced her engagement to Mr. Wickersham last night, I believe. Heard that this morning. Was too busy to go up last night myself. Maybe you'll find time to help me play the host."

Steve turned toward the door. "So I heard," he replied, without facing around. "I'll try to be on hand."

CHAPTER XVI.
A Game of Cards.

WHEN they tucked a ninety-nine year clause into a franchise they mean it's forever, don't they?" Joe wanted to know. "Forever, to all intents and purposes," said Garry.

Joe's chest sank and rose in a long, long breath.

"It's no word to trifle with," he cautioned at last. "If you lose it'll be a considerable drouth."

"Cut!" invited Garry, and they started to play.

That other night Garry's stack of chips had lasted far longer than they did on this second occasion. A half hour later, when he rose to go to bed, his ninety-nine year promise of abstinence was piled symmetrically before Fat Joe. But his good night was gay. For a time after his departure Joe eyed Steve sidewise.

"Hum-m-m," he cleared his throat. "Hum-m-m! And I was expectin' you to turn up any hour of the last twenty-four with a request that I come and help bring home the remains. You must be quite a silver tongued exhorter, aren't you, Steve?"

Stephen O'Mara was silent over the paper which Joe had handed him earlier in the evening, and the lack of any offer on his part to go into details did not trouble his questioner. Fat Joe sat and bobbed his head over what would never cease to be a miracle in his eyes.

"And he'll stick this time," he vented his wonder aloud. "He's surely going to stick!" Then he smiled widely. "And I reckon you'll have to admit that I handled the small part that came my way with ease and dispatch when I tell you that he didn't catch so much as one lonesome pair all the time I was dealing. I'm ashamed of myself. I haven't seen such a mean, crooked game of stud dealt since I came east."

Garry was very quiet the next morning when he and Steve went back to their work; before noon came his uneasiness had become very apparent to the man he was assisting. But neither his silence nor his nervousness any longer worried Steve. Instead the latter let himself smile over both those outward evidences of inward panic, whenever his thoughts were on Garry at all. For the latter's diffidence as the day aged became a flushed and warm cheeked thing, until at 4 in the afternoon Steve could no longer withhold the suggestion for which, wordlessly, Garry was asking.

"Joe was more than half right," he remarked, one eye to his level. "In spite of the fact that we refused to take him seriously. We can't let those people come in and find everything too hopelessly uncomfortable, so perhaps you'd better run ahead now, Garry, and see what he has accomplished. I don't want to leave this spot myself until I have some figures upon which I know I can rely. But you might run ahead, if you will. I'll be along later."

It was couched in the form of a request, but Garry's face flamed. He went, albeit a bit reluctantly. And he stopped more than a few times in his climb from the edge of the timber to the door of Steve's shack. But once he had passed over the threshold to find that unrecognizably trim room empty, his face grew heavy with disappointment. He was on the point of going back outside to scan the bowl of the valley when a tall, short skirted figure, enveloped in a voluminous apron which Fat Joe in a moment of mistaken zeal had once provided for the cook boy, flashed through the passageway from the kitchen annex and barely missed catapulting into his arms. Miriam Burrell, pink faced from the heat of the roaring wood stove and smudged with flour on forehead and cheek, lifted her apron and swung it like a flag of victory.

"I've found it," she sang triumphantly. "I've found out what was the matter! I'd just forgotten the baking powder, that was all! Next time!"

Then she recognized him. With outstretched hands still clutching the

edge of her apron, she stood, almond eyes widening, and scanned him from head to foot. Even Steve, who had been with him every moment, had noticed the hour to hour change that had been taking place in Garry's appearance. To the girl who had not seen him for weeks, that flushed, self-conscious man was a different Garry than she had never known before. Hungry her gaze went from open shirt to caked boots, from steady hands to clear eyes which made her own eyes shy. And then Miriam Burrell, cool and poised Miriam, did what many another maid in a checkered apron has done in similar situations. She lifted that stiff gingham to hide her unutterable happiness. But before he could speak she found her voice, nor was it very steady at that.

"I thought you were that party of idlers come back," she hesitated. "How—how tanned you are becoming, Garry! I thought they—oh, I can't tell you how glad I am to see you so—so well. I'm making biscuits for supper—that is, I've just been practicing until now. It seemed as though I'd forgotten something that was necessary to the recipe, because they were flatter after they were cooked than when I put them in the oven. And most marvelously heavy too! But it was just the baking powder, that was all. Do you—do you think you'd care to help?"

Steve was very late in returning to camp that night. Throughout the rest of the afternoon he set himself a pace knee deep in slushy mud which Garry could not have maintained. But when he paused there in the dark where he always stopped for a moment and a tumult of voices swept down to meet him he forgot his fatigue. He had lifted his battered hat from his head, striving to distinguish a single note in all that treble of girlish laughter, when, framed suddenly against the background of

light within, he saw a slender silhouette take up its station in the door frame. Barbara was still peering out across the darkness when he came up to her.

"We've been waiting dinner for you for almost an hour," she rebuked him in place of what might have been a commonplace greeting. "We've been waiting in the face of Mr. Morgan's insistence that it was practically useless. He has been telling us that when a man here in the hills fails to turn up for a meal you never bother to look for him. You know that the worst has happened."

Over her head the first eyes that Steve encountered that evening were those of Archibald Wickersham. While shaking hands with the girl he bowed in grave welcome to the tall figure in



"Oh, I can't tell you how glad I am to see you!"

leather puttees and whiplow riding breeches, and Wickersham from the far side of the room bowed back in equal gravity. Then Caleb Hunter grasped Steve's elbow and spun him around toward the light and peered at him accusingly. Barbara had not noticed until then how tired Steve looked.

"Before the others get to talking," said Caleb, "before the tide grows too strong for my weak voice, young man, I want to deliver a message. Miss Sarah wants it explicitly understood that unless you stop in to say hello on your next trip down she herself will take the trail up here. And lest that ultimatum sound too little threatening I might add that when Miss Sarah takes the trail she never travels with less than six trunks."

Caleb clung so tightly to his arm that it brought a tinge of color to Steve's cheeks. It was minutes before he could get away to change his wet clothes, and in that minute or two he could not help but contrast, grimly, his own mud bespattered attire with that of Archie Wickersham. The tired blue circles beneath his eyes were even more noticeable when he returned, to be ushered with much ceremony by Fat Joe to the head of the table.

(To be continued.)

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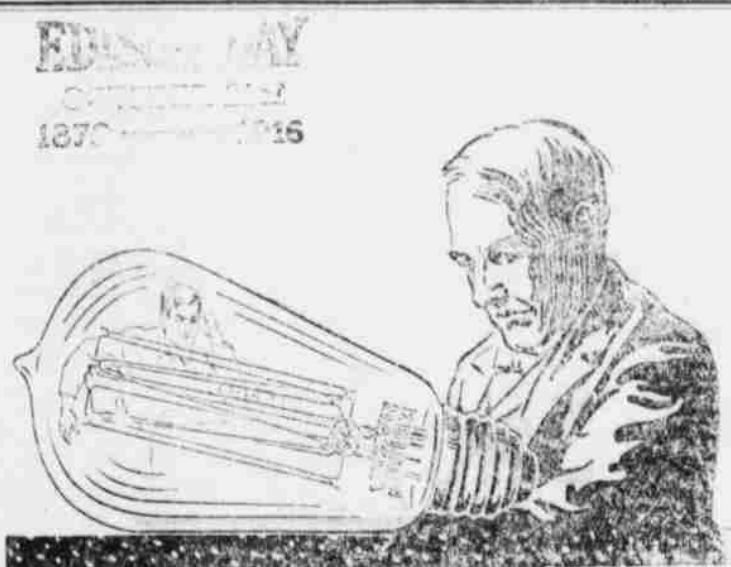


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